

How the theme of Purification or Repentance [*kshamā*] is elaborated in Buddhism

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Preamble

The subject as presented above, one immediately feels, pertains to life of man. This raises in our minds, with the same rapidity and with invariable succession, the need to ask three more questions.

1. What is life? 2. Has it any meaning? 3. Can we make it any better than what it is: when, where and how?

As I endeavour to find answers to these questions, I have to do so while still remaining within the threshold of man. These are my genuine limitations. At the same time, my age of seventy-six, coupled with the benefit of having taught the subject of Buddhism in theory and practice at university level for a little over forty years, gives me some comfort and a sense of ease, as I attempt to write on this subject to your learned journal, *Pro Dialogo*. The fact that since my retirement seven years ago, I have taken to the life of a full-fledged monk [a Buddhist monk being essentially a salvation seeker], bestows on me the total detachment I need for this kind of undertaking. I am not writing for Buddhism.

Whether one has taken up the stand of viewing Buddhism as a philosophy or as a religion [this depending on current definitions of religion in English dictionaries] or even as neither, we would do well to make a preliminary remark about a very specific position in early Theravada Buddhism which makes the rest of its theories and practices distinctly different from those in other theistic religions. Before we proceed any further, this position has to be both recognized and appreciated.

Theravada Buddhist Tradition

Let me explain straight-away what we mean by early Theravada Buddhism. Time wise, this is what belongs to the first three or four centuries after the appearance in the world of the historically accepted Buddha [Siddhartha Gautama] about the 5th century before the Christian era. Its literary sources lie in what is now recognized as Pali Canonical literature. Region wise, countries like Myanmar [Burma], Sri Lanka and Thailand preserve this tradition. Several computerized versions of this literature are now available in the world, including a Sri Lankan on the internet as public domain. [Inquire ibric@sri.lanka.net]. On some vital issues of religious thought, the traditions of the Mahayana [of the Far East] and the Vajrayana [of Tibet] may understandably appear to be different.

In the Pali texts of the Theravada tradition, the Buddha is presented as rejecting in no uncertain terms the acceptance of a Supreme Divinity as a creator, protector or controller of the world or the universe [*attāno loko anabhissaro* MN. II. 68]. According to him both the cosmic setup [in the vastness known to us today] and life therein, including the humans, has a causal genesis [*paṭiccasamuppanna*]. He also insisted on the futility of searching for its first beginnings. His teachings are the outcome of a logical causal analysis [*idappaccayatā paṭiccasamuppādo*] of what is before our very eyes.

Anthropocentrism

In a study of world religions, then and now, this stand which the Buddha takes up appears a unique one. Presumably, it is Jainism alone, a senior contemporary of Buddhism in India, which held views similar to the Buddha. This shift of accent, not only with regard to the genesis of life with all its malformations of diseases and deformities, but also with regard to the correction and consequent amelioration of the suffering of the human who is plunged therein, highlights Buddhism's challenging deflection in the direction of anthropocentrism.

Buddhism makes man accountable for what he is today and for what he is

going to be tomorrow, both in terms of one single life here and now, and for many more lives to come. According to **Buddhism, this accountability is not only backed by the loftiness which the human mind** possesses, when compared with that of the animals who surround him, but it is also required to be so and demanded by man's such comparatively superior position. Man is declared to be acting on judgement [*cetayitvā kammaṃ karoti*] and not on mere reflexes. It is such thought-out actions or action with *cetanā* [*sañcetanikānaṃ kammānaṃ katūnaṃ*] which bring about their fruition as good or bad. The entire Buddhist theory of moral goodness is built upon this.

Purification and / or Pollution: Vis -A- Vis the Individual

In Buddhism, i.e. in terms of a religious or spiritual context, the concept of purity is essentially personal. It is also essentially human, both purity and impurity being aspects of human life. It has not even a remotely linked divine aspect. Purity or impurity of humans is of value to them only to the extent that it does either draw them nearer to or distance them away from achieving their transcendental goal of Nirvana. In the process of living in the world, incorrectly responding to the continuous bombardment of sensory stimuli with which the world is gifted, humans do collect an ever increasing volume of impurities, referred to in Buddhist texts under the names of *āsava* and *kilesa* [Skt. *āṣava* and *kleśa*]. Buddhists look upon these as accumulated corrosiveness of the mind. Hence they refer to the achievement of the transcendental goal of Nirvana in Buddhism as the liberation of the human mind, by the humans themselves [*āsavehi cittaṃ vimucci*].

Purity & Liberation: The Role of Wisdom

We need to emphasize here the words **by the humans** because it is invariably the perfect and total maturing of the wisdom, which is within the reach of humans [*paññāya c'assa disvā*], which brings about this release of the mind. This release which is called *mutti* [Skt. *mukti*] or *vimutti* which all humans are capable of obtaining, each through his or her own wisdom [*paccattaṃ veditabbo*].

viññūh] is seen in Buddhism through a twin telescopic vision. On the one hand, it [i.e. this Buddhist state of Nirvana] is the complete emancipation of one's own mind [*ceto-vimutti*], here in this very existence, of all its defiling traits or impurities [*āsava* and *kilesa* referred to above].

Hence this is the highest imaginable state of purification in Buddhism. Purification of oneself, by oneself, for the attainment and in the attainment of the aspired highest religious bliss. On the other, let it be noted again that this bliss is also referred to as the release or liberation through wisdom [*paññā vimutti*]. For in Buddhism, faith [= *bhakti*] on the part of the worshipper or grace [= *prasāda*] on the part of the power or person prayed to or worshipped has no role to play in bringing about the worldling's liberation. This wisdom is the final product of the threefold religious or spiritual culture in Buddhism referred to as *tisso sikkhā*. It is preceded by perfection of moral goodness or *sīla* and *samādhi* or culture of the mind to the highest point of concentration.

The Dhammapada, which the Buddhists uphold as one of their best manuals on the subject of Buddhist teachings, sums up this purification process with adequate stress on the role of the individual [Dhp. v. 165]. 'Purification is one's own achievement [*suddhī asauddhī paccattam* = Purity and impurity are both self-wrought]. None besides oneself has any role to play in it [*nāñño m' aññaṃ visodhaye* = No other purifies another]. '

The agency through which this pollution, which requires subsequent purification, takes place is the continuous process of one's own conscious action in one's daily process of living. These acts are referred to as *kamma* [Skt. *karman*]. Or more precisely willed action or conscious acts [*sañcetanika kamma*].

Pollution: What Brings It About

This pollution through consciously willed activity [*sañcetanika kamma*] is viewed as being equivalent to sinning against oneself, i.e. injuring or damaging oneself in relation to one's spiritual aspirations or reach for Nirvana. Such willed activity which pollute humans err in three specific areas of greed [*lobha*], hatred

[*dosa*] and delusion [*moha*]. An over-inflated sense of selfhood or ego [*ahamkāra*], struggles all the time to acquire and possess things of the world in excess of one's needs. Instances where one exceeds the saner and sober limits of real needs are referred to as items of greed. Thereafter, it leads one to a subtle and endless process, fair or foul, of acquisition for the purpose of gratification of sensory requirements.

In the world today, its subtlety prevents people from clearly seeing need as different from greed, both at individual and at collective levels, nationally and internationally. It is a glaring global malaise. In many countries today, right across the globe, many people from diverse segments of the international community, religious, political, social etc. are being publicly prosecuted and severely punished for lustfully exceeding the decent limits of need with regard to acquisition of wealth and gratification of sex desires.

Need or Greed: The Challenge

One discovers many miscalculations of modern economic theorists and policy makers to be rooted in this. Examples for evils of greed, individually or collectively are readily available all around us. They do not have to be fished from a world beyond us. They grow from within us and out of us. Over production, whether in agriculture or industry, unmindful of consumer needs as well as just and fair distribution and marketing, are the large scale breeding grounds for global wastage and international rivalries. Individuals and communities, both powerful and large, are seen indulging in activities of this sort. They lead all the time to global frauds and deceptions. They also generate many secretly carried-out unscrupulous lines of activity. Thus when Buddhists speak of greed in their religious culture, they do so with a down to earth meaning and relevance, with an individual and social dimension.

Hatred: Lack of Self Esteem

Let us now move on to hatred, the second of the three basic evils which were

referred to above, keeping very much in mind the fact that they all have as their spring-board the illusory or deluding notion of selfhood. This is what makes Buddhism very eloquent and equally outspoken in its enunciation of the theory of soullessness or *anatta*. It denounces and rejects the possibility of upholding any notion of an unchanging, personal self within the human which in some mysterious way is linked up with a divine, away and apart from the existential reality of the humans of this world.

Equally or much more powerfully operative than the concept of attraction towards oneself, in terms of self-interest, is the one of repulsion or rejection. On this very basic human phenomenon of dislike of what one does not choose for oneself, come the basic failings of conflict, hatred and enmity. Murders and massacres, both at individual and collective levels, are the order of the day. Not that they did not exist in the past. Perhaps less in number and less taken note of. Psychologists today, at international research levels, are seen labouring to discover the causes and motivations behind these. Of such tragedies of a larger scale, the more developed and prosperous countries like the U.S.A., Europe and Australia, yield better examples of regular and recurrent occurrence. While most of these, at individual level, are traceable to forms of aberrant psychological malfunctioning in terms of individual needs, like lack of self-esteem and frustration, at collective group levels they seem to reflect ethnic, political and religious viciousness, diversely nurtured over centuries time wise, and equally diversely located territorially, both in the north and the south of the equator. Evidence of these are the wars, not necessarily of this century, and the devastating invasions and the massive incursions violently carried into the territories of others. These undeniably pollute both individuals and nations, and purification therefrom, if any is desired, has to be sought here and now.

For they all constitute offenses by man against man, never divinely directed or supported. We think it would be blasphemous, if such sanctions were sought from elsewhere by the offenders even in their weaker moments, in defense of their offenses.

Criminality and Down To Earth Pollution

It is wild eruptions of these two weaknesses of greed and hatred which lead to an utter confusion of values among men and women, resulting in delusion or what the Buddhist scriptures refer to as *moha*. Impurity or personal pollution of the humans, is what they acquire or what they inherit in consequence of their own action, consciously committed in those three channels, in word or deed. In Buddhism, there being an unmistakable rejection of a higher power above man, one can neither think of sinning against such an agency nor of appealing to such an authority for purification from such acts of sinning. Further, prayer or appeal for forgiveness [Pali *khamā* = Skt. *kṣamā*] for any such sinning is equally out of the picture.

Pollution in Buddhist religious thinking which has been referred to so far is in relation to those conditions or factors which obstruct one's path or journeying to the final liberation in Nirvana. The clearance of that path is essentially a personal one [*suddhī asuddhī paccattaṃ nāñño maññaṃ visodhaye* = Purity and impurity are personally brought about. No one can bestow purity on another. Dh. v. 165].

Purification and Self Correction

Personal purification from pollution of the above sort is clearly countenanced in Buddhist teachings. Self-correction in this very life with regard to those areas of erring is the primary one. For it brooks no delay. Personal pollution which is brought about with regard to one's total being leads to an uneasiness in one's life, comparable to a millstone around one's neck. Such pollution must immediately be personally recognized and admitted and steps taken within oneself for their correction. These are literally roadblocks on one's path to liberation and no further journeying can be attempted without clearing them first.

They cannot be allowed to accumulate. This is done through self-development which runs through a wide range, severally graded, like physical disciplining or *kāya -bhāvanā*, moral upgrading or *sīla - bhāvanā* and mental rehabilitation or *citta - bhāvanā*. The chief characteristic of this process of

purification is the range of personal culture or growth which is brought about within oneself. The scriptural word in Pali which refers to this process is *bhāvanā* which is derived from a verbal form *bhāveti* which means to make grow or bring about a culture. If this process of purification is successfully carried out there is no more residue of pollution left for which the doer has to pay in a life hereafter. This process of purification refers only to a limited area of pollution.

Evolutionary Purification

The belief in being born again after death gives the Buddhist concept of self-purification yet another dimension. The gravity of the offenses committed during one's lifetime being far greater than could be paid off here during the period between life and death, one has necessarily to carry them to a life beyond death, to compensate for them in the life which immediately follows [*upapajja*] or in any other which are to follow [*apare vā pariyāye*] in the long life-continuum which the Buddhists refer to as *samsāra*. In this process of purifying oneself of the pollution which one has acquired for oneself through one's own miscalculation and misdoing [*pāpa - kamma*], there emerge two very important points which one must not lose sight of. It is stated with adequate stress that no one shall make an end of suffering [i.e. reach the goal of Nirvana] without paying off [*appaṭisaṃviditvā*] for the consciously committed evil actions [*sañcetanikānam kammānam katānam*], and thereby acquiring the necessary purity and cleanliness. With this is therefore tied up the idea that evil-doers have, on death, to descend to states of existence which are inferior and degenerate when compared with the human position which they once held and which they have, on their own accord ruined and let go waste. This consequent decline and degeneracy is clearly indicated in all the Pali words used in the original scriptures to refer to these lower level of existence [*niraya* = drift away from || *apāya* = fall apart || *vinipāta* = precipitous descent].

Wages of Sin

Such downward passage or bad borne from this life to the next is called

duggati [= bad journeying]. In this sense, they are well and truly, states of purgatory. Our texts lead us to conclude that the evil-doers, after this penitential suffering, invariably return to the status of humans to re-start their life cycles [*so hi nūna ito gantvā yoniṃ laddhāna mānusiṃ*]. It is from this stage alone that they can strive for their release. For it is here and now that they accomplish it while they are yet alive, with nothing more to gain after death. On the other hand, he who through his spiritual earnestness and by his spiritual endeavour cultures himself to the acme of his spiritual accomplishment and gains the possibility of terminating the *samsaric* process of being born again, would thereby eliminate the possibility of 'paying for one's sins' in a life after death. It has to be here and now, if any payment has to be made at all, for there is not a life after for him for such payment [*idh ' eva taṃ vedaniyaṃ aññaṃ vatthu na vijjati*]. Of him it is said that action exists not the fruition thereof [*kammaṃ ahosi na vipāko*]. This is what is mistakenly spoken of as *ahosi kamma* or written off sin. Such a class does not exist by itself.

Kshama: Apology and Forgiveness

Let it be noted right now that we do not equate the term *khamā* to repentance. Repentance [*vipparisāra*] is rejected as an unhealthy pathological state of mind. The mind should be cleared of such states, the moment they are detected. Khama, in our scriptural language of Pali is 'forgiveness', or ' tendering an apology '. A very vibrant concept of forgiving and asking for forgiveness does exist in Buddhism at a very different plane. It has been clearly explained above that religious or spiritual contamination which requires a meaningful and effective process of purification is essentially centered on each individual [*suddhī asuddhī paccattaṃ*]. This is in terms of religio-spiritual offenses. Buddhism equally well recognizes offenses committed by humans against fellow humans at down to earth social level. In terms of social ethics and communal propriety, both individuals and groups have to pay heed to these. Buddhism does not endeavour to legislate to its lay community on these issues although a great deal is laid down by way of ethics of good living.

Within the monastic community, very serious notice is taken of breach of propriety. It is legally laid down as to what is proper and what is not proper in the behaviour of the members of the monastic community. What is significant about them is their reciprocal validity, applying equally well to the senior and to the junior, to the teacher as well as to the pupil. Even today, it reaches thus far. When a junior respectfully approaches his senior, teacher or brother monk, and apologizes for a mistake committed and asks for forgiveness, the senior does always, while offering forgiveness at request, calls upon the junior to forgive him for any offense committed by him on his part. The regular phrasing of this is ' I forgive you. Please do forgive me as well ' [*khamāmi khamitabbam*].

[In this essay, many issues have been discussed at length, going into great detail, both in terms of theory and practice, in order to eliminate any possible inter-religious confusion, in the mind of the reader because of the reality of our polarized thinking at times.]